

Fern Bittner American Royal Horseperson of the Year

(Editor's note: The following presentation was made by Judy Werner on Tuesday, the opening night of the UPHA American Royal National Championship Horse Show.)

Tonight we present the American Royal Horseperson of the Year Award. This award was first presented in 1999 with the recipient being Missouri Horseman Don Hulse and from that year forward each November the American Royal has honored a person who has contributed to the show horse industry and to the American Royal. It is doubtful that any of the previous winners have touched as much of the show horse world as this year's recipient-Fern Palmer Bittner.

Fern grew up in Columbia, Mo., showing the stock trained by the famous Missouri horseman and Fern's grandfather, Tony T. Palmer. Fern and her sister, Betty, were Tony Palmer's secret weapons and they won countless classes on horses such as Murray Cason, Stonewall Glamour, The Irish Star and many others. This was an era when the Missouri Saturday night horse show was filled with horses trained by the fabled mid Missouri horseman and the competition was fierce. Fern's parents, Howard and Hazel Palmer, were among the first to raise quality spotted American Saddlebreds. Among those who appreciated their breeding decisions was Ellen Scripps Davis who added the Palmer bloodlines to her famous Scripps/Miramar breeding stock.

When it came time to go to college Stephens College was a natural choice for Fern. While at Stephens she was the vice president of the Prince of Wales Club and in that position Fern managed her first horse show. Little did she know where that would lead her in life!

Following Stephens College, Fern went to Lindenwood College in St. Charles to obtain a bachelor's degree in physical education. While attending Lindenwood Fern taught riding for three years and following her graduation she continued as director of horsemanship for 24 years, teaching saddle seat, stock and hunter seat until 1981. During this time she instructed private students to major wins. Some of her past students include Marsha and Gary Garone, Nealia McCracken, Lori Glickman, Lee "Cookie" DeLott, Mary Ann Meiners, Sally Quillian, Rhonda Palmer Dickerson, Karen White Coup, Dr. Jill Baahman, Joni Friesen and the late Maria Knight. A little known fact about Fern is that prior to becoming director of horsemanship at Lindenwood, Fern accepted the position of assistant professor of physical education, and her teaching talents were in areas that not many of us knew she excelled. These included archery, volleyball and bowling!

During Fern's tenure at Lindenwood she totally changed the look of the horsemanship program. When she took over, the barn was in bad condition, there were just a few students and there even fewer horses. Determination is an adjective that has described Fern her entire life, and it really epitomizes her years at Lindenwood. She had a new barn built with 40 stalls and



the horsemanship program grew to over 100 students. People in the horse world started taking note of the successful riders being turned out from this program and Fern turned this into a catalyst for obtaining some excellent gift horses to the program. Murray's King, Boomerang, Sweetheart Stonewall and Stonewall's College Queen all found their way to Lindenwood.

The year 1959 is an important one in Fern's life. A few years prior, Lindenwood had hired a young professor of music, Groff Bittner. Fern and Groff were married in 1959. Groff understood Fern's horse addiction and he has supported her in all of her endeavors from their wedding day forward. There is another reason 1959 is important to this story - Fern got her AHSA judge's card that year, and another important part of her life started unfolding.

Constantly looking for ways to improve the horse shows held at Lindenwood Fern decided that music would be a great addition and asked her husband to play the organ at the shows. The horse show world is blessed that Fern asked Groff to play: we have been enjoying his talent on the keyboard at horse shows all across the country ever since that inauspicious start.

Lindenwood College suddenly closed the doors of its riding department in 1980. The saying "when one door closes another door opens" could not be more appropriate at this time in Fern's life. Her horse show managing experience at Stephens and Lindenwood served her well, and she ventured into the management side of horse shows. At the time, managing shows was not a job held by many women. Fern, never one to back from a challenge, stepped into her new profession at the Missouri State Fair. This was a time when Missouri horseman such as Art Simmons, Sug Utz, Charlie Judd, Dale Pugh, Don Hulse and others brought large strings of horses to the Missouri State Fair. This group was not easily impressed, but Fern soon gained their respect for one reason - the horse show ran with the ease and efficiency that became Fern's trademark.

Horse shows across the country were soon availing themselves of Fern's rare ability to run a show like clockwork yet at the same time keep the show committee and the exhibitor happy. A glance at Fern's resume

lists 17 shows that she has managed - the majority for several consecutive years. Just a few of the shows that have benefited from Fern's management are the Missouri State Fair, St. Louis National, Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show, Oklahoma Centennial, Pin Oak Charity, Morgan Grand National and, of course, the American Royal.

Not only was Fern popular with exhibitors and show committees, her officials knew, as one recently said to me, that she would always be there with them in any situation or problem. Fern holds a USEF judging card in several breeds and divisions and she is also a recognized steward. She herself has officiated at numerous shows, from the smallest to the largest. She understands all the ups and downs of being an official at a horse show.

I got an insight into the respect officials have for Fern by sharing a room with her at many a USEF or UPHA Convention. Fern always had countless committee meetings at these conventions yet she would find time to be on the phone contacting officials for the various shows she was managing in a given year. Many times the official would return Fern's call when she was out of the room, and I would take a message which was liable to be from a carriage driving judge in Canada who had been contacted about the Morgan Grand National or a Saddlebred judge called regarding the American Royal or a reining judge for an Arabian show. Invariably they started off the conversation by asking me to tell Fern how honored they were that she had called. Each night, Fern would be checking off her list of contacted officials and moving on to prize lists, contracts, the list seemed endless and this was January!

Throughout the years Fern has been a strong supporter of giving young judges a chance by hiring them. She has constantly been on the lookout for new and talented announcers, stewards, paddock announcers, etc. Fern believes in putting something back into her profession and she has worked throughout the years on numerous committees of both UPHA and USEF and is on countless equestrian related advisory boards and steering committees.

With a schedule that would exhaust most people, Fern has always taken time to enjoy her family. Husband Groff is now retired from Lindenwood College, and he provides the music at many horse shows. Fern and Groff enjoy spending time on what was her parents' farm in Columbia, Mo. They have a daughter Rhonda, who had a very successful career in equitation, and a son Steward and eight grandchildren that keep them very busy.

The horse show world is a better place due to the influence of Fern Bittner. She is candid, fair, determined and honest. These qualities make her uniquely qualified to receive the honor of American Royal Horseperson of the Year.